

Setting Limits: How to Help the Child Who Makes Fun of Others

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By Polly Greenberg

The Child Who Makes Fun of Others

Helping the child who needs to be more respectful of others

Dear Polly, I have a child in my preschool class, Wanda, who makes fun of others. You can see the hurt feelings on the other child's face. We are under so much pressure to teach academics, that I'm not sure if I should take too much time to deal with this.

Sure you should! For over 100 years, early childhood educators have been taught to work with the child as a whole. Our biggest job is to join parents in helping young children become good people. I spend lots of time with teachers of young children and see that, in spite of the pressures they feel (a reality that many teachers experience), many make helping children with feelings and interpersonal relations a priority, too.

Maintain a United Front

It's important to provide a child with steady guidance toward being a person capable of making and keeping friends, , and later, even jobs. For me, one of the most important values is being kind to everyone. If you agree with me and if you and Wanda's parent(s) are willing to invest time in working on developing kind behaviors at school and home, I think you'll make progress with Wanda. Can you schedule a casual conference, perhaps with a snack, to talk about this?

Be Consistent

What does it mean to be consistent with a child? It means adults must:

- make a policy together that you both (or all) think is reasonable and enforceable
- pick up on any violations of the policy every time they occur
- take a minute to see the situation through
Time and again, I've seen parents and teachers defeat their own efforts by failing to follow through on the "rule" they themselves established!

Set Boundaries

It's important to set boundaries when working with children who have difficulty respecting others. Here is an example: "In this classroom [family] we say and do things to make people feel good, not to make them feel sad." If a child intentionally makes another child sad, he needs to do something kind for the child he has wronged.

Try These Strategies

- Every time you hear Wanda mock or tease someone who obviously isn't enjoying it, say to the victim in front of Wanda, "Did you like it when Wanda said that?"
- If appropriate, ask the child if he wants to tell Wanda anything about it. Children are most likely to make fun of other children who appear to be different in some way. Help the targeted child make a good point. For example, a child whose handicapped arm Wanda has just made fun of might say, "My arm is that way because I was born that way." A child to whom Wanda has just said, tauntingly, "You don't have a dad," might say, "I do have a dad, but he doesn't live with us."
- Ask the victim, "What can Wanda do to make you feel good again?" Ask Wanda, "What can you do to make Eduardo feel better?" If the offended or distressed child says he would like a turn to play with Wanda's favorite toy or eat her cookie, so be it. As Wanda gets the hang of this reparations routine, she may come up with her own creative ways to make things right again. Besides soothing the victim's painful feelings, the objective is to give the child who was unkind a way to make amends, show kindness, learn a new habit, and feel good about herself, too.

Implement a "Kindness Curriculum"

Be a model of kindness in the classroom. If you realize you're speaking rudely or even unkindly to a child, apologize. For example, "I want you to work at the numbers table, but I shouldn't have said it so loudly. I'm sorry I was rude to you. Now, which game will you start with?" (It's always best to end on a positive note to minimize lingering anger and more unwanted behavior.)

Just the other day, a Head Start teacher told me that she has only one rule in her classroom: Be thoughtful of other people. Everything else falls under it, and when you give it a moment's thought, this rule does say it all—from being respectful of people who seem different from you at first glance, to listening to what your classmate is saying and raising your hand if you want a turn to talk.

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